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ABSTRACT

The five studies reviewed in this brief publication examine the scope of current research on service learning and its effects on participants. An introduction defines service learning as "an instructional practice in which students perform service as a way of complementing the knowledge and skills learned in the classroom." Titles and authors of the works summarized are as follows: "Research on School-Based Service-Learning: The Evidence Builds" (Shelley H. Billig); "Summary Report: National Evaluation of Learn and Serve America" (Alan Melchior); "An Assessment of Elementary School Service-Learning Teaching Methods: Using Service-Learning Goals" (Cliff Akujobi and Robert Simmons); "The Effects of Service Learning on Middle School Students' Social Responsibility and Academic Success" (Peter Scales and colleagues); "Is Service-Learning Really Better Than Community Service? A Study of High School Service Program Outcomes" (Andrew Furco). (RT)

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Research roundup

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

VOLUME 19, NUMBER 1
FALL 2002

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Shelley H. Billig

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NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS
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Service-Learning

Shelley H. Billig

Service-learning has gotten a lot of attention lately as a potentially important school improvement practice because it both helps students learn important academic skills and revitalizes the civic mission of schools. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, service-learning is currently practiced in about one-third of all public schools.

Service-learning is an instructional practice in which students perform service as a way of complementing the knowledge and skills learned in the classroom. Most service-learning activities are planned and implemented by students, based on authentic community needs. Students may engage in a variety of activities, such as environmental studies, tutoring, obtaining oral histories from seniors, assisting immigrants with enrolling students in school and learning English, and helping the homeless. The students then discuss their experiences, linking them through teacher-guided reflection to what they are learning in science, math, language arts, social studies, and other subjects.

Research on service-learning shows that it can have multiple positive outcomes for its participating students, schools, and communities. The best service-learning programs are linked to standards, related to specific outcomes, involve writing and discussion, and are of sufficient duration and intensity. The studies reviewed here examine the depth and breadth of current research on service-learning, and a variety of effects on its participants.

Shelley H. Billig summarizes research on K-12 school-based service-learning conducted over the last decade and discusses what needs to be done to maximize outcomes.

Alan Melchior examines the results of a national study of service-learning in middle and high schools and documents its effects on academic achievement and interpersonal and social responsibility.

Cliff Akujobi and Robert Simmons provide the results of their study of service-learning in five Michigan elementary schools.

Peter Scales and colleagues discuss the results of their study of service-learning participants and comparison groups in three middle schools.

Andrew Furco describes the results of a study of high school service-learning and poses the question, "Is service-learning really better than community service?"

Shelley H. Billig is vice president of RMC Research Corporation in Denver, Colorado, and an active researcher in the field of service-learning.

Billig, Shelley H. **"Research on School-Based Service-Learning: The Evidence Builds."** *Phi Delta Kappan* 81:9 (May 2000): 658-664. EJ606453. *Available from*: Order Dept., Phi Delta Kappa International, P.O. Box 789, Bloomington, IN 47402-0789. Complete issue $5.50 plus $3 handling. 812-339-1156.

This comprehensive review of the research from 1990 to 1999 provides a summary of the effects of K-12 service-learning on its participants. The researcher offers a specific definition and examples of service-learning, explores its prevalence in U.S. public schools, and traces its growth. The review

EA 031956

outlines criteria for quality practice and samples policies at the state and district level that support service-learning.

Citing dozens of studies, the author documents the effects of service-learning on students in the areas of social development, academic achievement, civic engagement, and career exploration. The findings show that service-learning can increase students' ability to learn complex subject matter, decrease their involvement in risky behaviors, and encourage them to form bonds with adult role models other than teachers and parents. Other studies show that students involved in service-learning can develop a stronger service ethic, respect for diversity, a sense of efficacy, a more realistic sense of career possibilities, and a greater likelihood of being engaged in school and the community.

The author also provides a summary of service-learning effects on participating schools and communities. She concludes with a brief critique of the research in the field and a plea for more rigorous studies.

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management, 5207 University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon 97403-5207. Phone 800-438-8841.
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Melchior, Alan. **Summary Report: National Evaluation of Learn and Serve America.** Waltham, Mass: Center for Human Resources, Brandeis University, 1999. 34 pages. *Available online at* **http://heller.brandeis.edu/chr/LSReport.pdf**.

This evaluation of the national Learn and Serve America program examined the effects of high-quality service-learning implementation in 17 middle and high schools. The researchers administered surveys to approximately 1,000 students in the fall and spring of the 1995-96 academic year and again in the spring of 1997. They also examined school records of service-learning participants and comparison group members, and conducted teacher surveys, interviews with community members and participants, and classroom observations of service-learning activities.

Results showed that participation in the program had a range of positive outcomes for students, teachers, and community members. Statistically significant short-term impacts were found on students' math grades and overall engagement with school. Marginally significant short-term effects on grades in other core subjects also were documented, as was a slight decline in English and language arts. The study also showed that service-learning participants were more likely to accept cultural diversity, become aware of community needs, and develop an ethic of volunteer service.

Although the effects of service-learning were generally greater in high schools than in middle schools, more than 95 percent of the participants reported that they were satisfied with the experience and 87 percent felt they had learned a skill that would be useful in the future.

Many of the positive effects of service-learning appeared to fade over time, with high school students retaining effects longer than middle school students. But impacts were more likely to endure over time when participants continued their involvement in organized service.

Akujobi, Cliff; and Simmons, Robert. **"An Assessment of Elementary School Service-Learning Teaching Methods: Using Service-Learning Goals."** *National Society for Experiential Education Quarterly* (Winter 1997): 19-27. *Available from*: National Society for Experiential Education, 9001 Braddock Road, Springfield, VA 22151. $3 for print copy of article. 703-933-0017.

This study presents the results of an investigation of service-learning in five Michigan elementary school classrooms during the 1995-96 school year. Researchers conducted classroom and service-learning activity observations, interviewed teachers and administrators, and reviewed documents. They also analyzed fourth-grade scores of the Michigan Educational Assessment Program to compare achievement for students who participated in service-learning in third grade with those who had not.

Results showed that most service-learning activities promoted emotional intelligence and a strong social climate rather than encouraging the acquisition of complex thinking skills. Nonetheless, students who participated in service-learning showed statistically significant higher scores on the state assessment than their nonparticipating peers in mathematics as well as several subtests related to reading.

Teachers' reasons for adopting service-learning tended to focus on their desire to help students engage in more meaningful learning. Teachers, particularly those in the upper elementary grades, also felt that service-learning was a useful tool to help maintain discipline in their classrooms and stress the value of character.

All respondents discussed the value of support from the principal. In several of the study sites, it was the principal who introduced the teachers to service-learning and provided a supportive climate. This support was expressed by sharing the vision, promoting teacher collaboration, providing flexible scheduling, securing transportation, and checking on relevant policies, including liability.

Scales, Peter; Blyth, Dale; Berkas, Thomas; and Kielsmeier, James. **"The Effects of Service Learning on Middle School Students' Social Responsibility and Academic Success."** *Journal of Early Adolescence* 20:3 (August 2000): 331-358. *Available from*: Sage Publications, Inc., 2455 Teller Road, Thousand Oaks, CA 91320. Complete issue $27. 800-818-7243.

This article summarizes the effects of service-learning on 1,153 racially and socioeconomically diverse middle school students from three schools located in Kentucky, Massachusetts, and Missouri. The selected schools shared three criteria: at least two years of experience with service-learning; participation in service-learning for at least half of the school year; and implementation of at least some criteria associated with effective middle schools, such as cooperative learning. Students were randomly assigned, about half to a service-learning group and half to a non-participating control group.

The groups were compared on a wide range of measures at the beginning and end of the school year, including social responsibility, personal development, parent involvement, engagement in schoolwork, perceived scholastic competence, responsibility for academic achievement, grade point average, conduct in school, and goal orientation. Positive results were shown in areas such as helping behaviors, concern for others' welfare, pursuit of higher grades, and personal development.

Results became statistically significant when middle school students were highly motivated by their service-learning activities, when they provided a substantial number of hours of service, and when they engaged in reflection activities. The authors also pointed out that, despite assurances from the schools, the service-learning activities were not as well linked to academic work as they should have been.

Furco, Andrew. **"Is Service-Learning Really Better Than Community Service? A Study of High School Service Program Outcomes."** In Andrew Furco and Shelley H. Billig, eds., *Service Learning: Essence of the Pedagogy*, Volume 1 of the Advances in Service-Learning Research series. Greenwich, Conn.: Information Age Publishers, 2001. 286 pages. Available from: Information Age Publishers, Inc., P.O. Box 4967, Greenwich, CT 06831. $29.95 plus $5.50 handling. 203-661-7602.

In this book chapter, Furco examines the similarities and differences between service-learning and community service in six domains—academic, career, personal, social, civic, and ethical—in terms of the primary intended beneficiary, primary focus, intended educational purpose, integration with curriculum, and the nature of the service activity.

Community service, which is aimed toward helping the recipient, has service as its primary focus. Community service programs are typically based on social causes and intend to produce civic, ethical, and interpersonal outcomes. In contrast, service-learning is typically based on an academic discipline, provides benefits for both the recipient and provider of the service, and intends to produce both academic and civic outcomes.

Both community service and service-learning are distinguished from service-based internships, which are intended to primarily benefit the provider and have a primary focus on learning and career development. Services within internships are typically based on industry needs or desire to explore a career pathway.

The author focused on differences in educational development between students who perform service and students who do not, as well as differences in outcomes among those engaged in community service, service-learning, and internships. His study involved 529 students from two California high schools who participated in all three types of service programs.

Results indicated that there were significant differences between the groups who performed service and those who did not. Students who performed service had statistically significant gains in positive attitudes toward school, themselves, the future, and their communities. They also tended to find more meaning from their service events, discussing them more often from personal and philosophical viewpoints.

When the author examined differences between the three service groups, he found that service-learning participants and interns scored higher in the academic domain than community service

participants and those who provided no service. Interns scored highest on the career domain, community service participants scored highest on the ethical domain, and the community service and service-learning groups scored highest on the civic domain.

The research also revealed that students who were most affected by their service experiences were those who were engaged in meaningful activities in which they had some interest and responsibility, and where they felt challenged. Students who felt they were "treated like adults" or "treated with respect" articulated the most enthusiasm and positive statements about their service experience. The most negative statements characterized service as "boring," "pointless," and "meaningless." □

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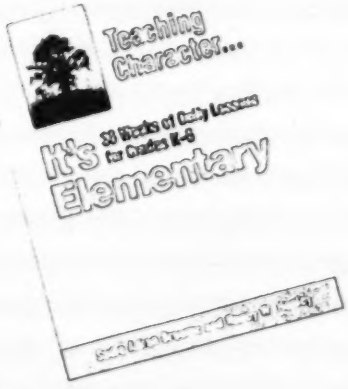

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